

Ramadan Greetings from President Barack Obama



Watch a video message from President Barack Obama greeting Muslim communities in the United States and all over the world for the month of Ramadan.

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MEPI Implementer Named Among Top 10 Who Are Changing the World of Internet and Politics



Eleana Gordon, Executive Director of the Center for Liberty in the Middle East (CLIME), is one of the winners of PoliticsOnline's 2009 "Top 10 Who Are Changing the World of Internet and Politics" competition for her role in founding the MEPI-funded Online Activism Institute (activisminstitute.org). The winners will be publicly announced in September and will receive their awards at the World e-Democracy Forum in Paris in October.

Over the past six months, the Online Activism Institute has used the Internet to teach civic activism skills to women. This Arabic-language program is operational in Egypt and Jordan and has provided pilot training for 90 women with its flagship online course, "Create Your Activism Plan," delivered in computer labs. Graduates have the opportunity to apply for eight weeks of additional online training, with options that include a course on leadership offered by George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management or one-on-one virtual mentoring in areas such as grassroots outreach and campaign management. Public users of the website can view inspiring interviews with activists in the region and access a selection of best resources on Democracy and Human Rights in Arabic. CLIME aims to publicly launch the Institute throughout the Middle East and North Africa in the fall of 2009.

Graduates of the Institute are already making a difference: one woman concerned about youth radicalization is now holding events in high schools and elementary schools to encourage volunteerism; another, a television anchor, produced a news segment on water pollution which received the highest ratings ever for the program; and a third has begun to hold lectures on women's rights in her rural community. With the help of their virtual mentors, these women have translated their activism dreams into action. You can learn more about some of the graduates and their efforts in the "Meet the Activists" section of the website, where they share their experiences in the video interviews. (<http://www.activisminstitute.org/joo/index.php/en/Meet-the-Activists/meet-activistssection>)

FEATURES

MEET Conference Promotes Entrepreneurship between U.S. and MENA Business Leaders



On August 4-5, 2009, entrepreneurs, executives, and civil society leaders from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the United States met in Istanbul to exchange ideas on thriving in tough economic times. Participants from the region had something in common – all were alumni of the MEPI-funded Middle East Entrepreneur Training (MEET) program, a project that identifies and trains a new core of business and civil society leaders in the MENA region. The MEET project offers participants specialized, practical training in business-related topics such as management and marketing. Implemented in the U.S. by the University of California-San Diego's Rady School of Management, the MEET project has already trained 395 future business leaders, 46% of whom are women. Through the efforts of these individuals, jobs and opportunities are opening up to more and more people in the region. Specifically, MEET alumni have created more than 700 new businesses.

Acting U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) for Near Eastern Affairs, Madelyn Spirnak, attended the event called, "New Strategies for Turbulent Times." In her keynote address, Acting DAS Spirnak praised the efforts of the MEET alumni network, saying that the broad-ranging and comprehensive relationships they have created with their colleagues throughout the Middle East and North Africa and in the United States "are precisely the kinds of partnerships envisioned by President Obama and Secretary Clinton."

For two days, participants examined industry-specific issues in small groups, and shared success stories with each other via panel discussions. At the close of the conference, participants offered positive feedback on the event and the MEET Program: "We came to Istanbul with ambiguous thoughts regarding the economic downturn, and we are going home full of optimism and with a clear vision of our next steps. And we had fun." Waleed Muselmani, Deputy Managing Director of Nazareth Transport and Tourism Co. Ltd., attended the 2009 Senior Executive Seminar in San Diego, California.

"The MEET Alumni Conference is a great networking opportunity where we have a chance to find new partners and to reunite with the team from our training programs. - Noor Zada, Trainer, Partners-Jordan for Civic Collaboration, attended the 2008 Civil Society Organization training program in Alexandria, Egypt.

"I believe the conference is bringing us new experiences and adding to our networks every year. My networks are really expanding due to the people I have met over the past four years". - Izzidin Abusalameh, Assistant Regional Manager, Cairo Amman Bank, attended the 2009 Senior Executive Seminar in San Diego, California.

MEPI and Dar Al Atta'a Support Omani Businesswomen



Women with little income in Oman, as in many other parts of the world, rely heavily on small-scale and home-based micro-enterprises for their livelihoods. MEPI recently funded a workshop to boost the capacity of these Omani women to stabilize and grow their businesses.

Organized by Dar Al Atta'a, a leading philanthropic NGO in Oman, the workshop was designed to help Omani women start and expand their small businesses by increasing their knowledge of key issues such as: micro-finance; legal frameworks; leadership and entrepreneurial skills; information technology; and the availability of government support for women and small-to-medium business owners. The workshop also helped raise the participants' confidence levels by teaching them critical business communication and networking skills, as well as addressing women's important role in society and the marketplace.

One of the workshop organizers from Dar Al Atta'a explained the organization's goals, recognizing that "it is our national duty to make a positive contribution to society. With this end in view, we have sought to adopt constructive ideas to participate in building a responsible community with practical experience, through which it can achieve its objectives. This has been, and remains, our mission for which we constantly strive."

Dar Al Atta'a also developed a training booklet and a website, "Women Entrepreneurs of Oman" (www.weoman.org), that allows participants to access important information on economic empowerment for Omani women, such as available support for small and medium businesses, and training and employment opportunities.

MEPI 2008 Student Leaders Program Alumnus Hosts Interfaith Dialogue



Recently, a Washington, D.C.-based MEPI staff member had the chance to catch up with Bachir Eddahy, a 2008 alumnus of the MEPI Student Leaders Program. Bachir has spent the last year, since the completion of the six-week program in August 2008, catalyzing positive change in Morocco. A dedicated social entrepreneur, Bachir believes that his 2008 trip to the United States made him care more about people in his society and other cultures. Even before the Student Leaders Program concluded, Bachir was eagerly brainstorming ways to use his newly-acquired skills. Now, he channels his skills and energy into advancing public conversation on issues that greatly impact social and political reform in his community.

Troubled by a lack of ongoing interfaith dialogue at his University, despite the diversity of Morocco's history and population, Bachir, a student perusing a Masters Degree in Cross Cultural and Literary studies at the University of Fez, set out to host an interfaith discussion for his University colleagues. Bachir decided to host the dialogue in his hometown of Laayoune, a city in the Western Sahara region. "I hail from a Muslim Family, and I see fundamentalists misrepresenting their faiths by committing violent acts in the name of religion. Interfaith dialogue today is more important than any time before," said Bachir when asked why he chose the discussion topic. As for the participant list, Bachir explained, "I invited a group of university teachers, students, and young business and social entrepreneurs, along with local religious leaders, to have a candid discussion on religion."

On August 10th, Bachir traveled with a group of 15 from Fez to Laayoune. The city's San Francisco Catholic Church served as the venue for the dialogue, and the discussion was facilitated by the Church's priest and a young local Muslim community leader. The topics centered on the importance of dialogue, harmony, and peace. Attendees reflected on their own experiences and shared their opinions on cultural and religious coexistence and harmony. Abdessalam Cham, a law student at the University of Fez, said "cultures and religions are made to coexist, not clash." While Mbarek Skoban, an English professor and translator, called for "bridging the world through translation of the written word to create a better understanding of other cultures."

The discussion was followed by a tour of the City of Laayoune where the San Francisco Church's priest, who has been a resident of the city for over 50 years, explained the colorful history of Laayoune and its population.

Bachir believes his 2008 MEPI experience was a key contributor to the success of his unique event, saying that "the leadership and planning skills acquired during the program made the event possible." Specifically, he explains that the MEPI Student Leaders Program builds understanding between different cultures, and teaches participants how to interact with groups with diverse views and of differing backgrounds. Bachir is already working on his next community service project; he is creating a mobile school to help provide education to the tribal population in Western Sahara.

MEPI's Young Women Leaders Program Launches at Lebanese American University



MEPI's Young Women Leaders (YWL) program kicked off on August 1 at Lebanese American University's (LAU's) Beirut campus with a two-week series of workshops to build the knowledge and leadership skills of 20 participants from Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Implemented by LAU, YWL is a two-year project that helps community leaders and activists develop women's rights initiatives in their home communities.

"One objective of the workshops is to have the participants develop project ideas to be implemented in their countries that would impact and empower women in their own communities and advance their social, economic and political situations," says Dr. Imad Salamey, YWL Program Director and Assistant Professor of Political Science at LAU. The program was designed with the recognition that female leaders in the Gulf often face more hurdles than their counterparts in other Arab countries. Most of the workshops were led by LAU faculty and covered a wide range of topics including how to deal with social disputes, how to use technology to promote goals, and how to write project proposals.

During the workshops, the selected participants were broken into country groups to prepare project proposals. Zaina al-Harhi, 32, an Omani participant employed as a human resources manager at a national bank, says her group's members will join forces to launch a women's counseling center, the first of its kind in Oman. "We don't have any centers back home that deal with women's issues, whether psychological, emotional, or [related to] increasing the job marketability of an individual," al-Harhi says. "This is a huge project, and it has to be implemented in a span of eight months, so we could use all the help we can get," she adds.

The participants' acknowledge the obstacles they may face while executing their proposals, mostly due, they say, to a general attitude of indifference toward women's rights in their countries. Lana Komsany, a 30-year-old theater actress and website editor from Saudi Arabia, laments that her country imposes a ban on NGOs, limiting the options available to her group. "I wouldn't measure the wealth of a country by its money as much as by the empowerment of its people," says Komsany.

Men, too, were encouraged to participate in the program, and three did — two from Yemen and one from Bahrain. Among them was Ibrahim Mothana, a 20-year-old journalist, activist and Public Relations Director of Hewar, a Yemeni organization that advocates for social dialogue. Mothana, who was also the youngest participant, said his group is planning a campaign for free and mandatory education for all citizens, regardless of gender. "The illiteracy rate among women is about 75 percent [in Yemen] and the education gap between men and women is very high," he says. "We're facing a problem and in the end, I've come to believe that our society can't be developed without educating and empowering women," Mothana adds. "It's a fact that we should recognize."

LAU President Dr. Joseph Jabbra and U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Michele Sison attended the program's closing ceremony and awarded certificates to the 20 participants. Afterwards, Ambassador Sison thanked the participants for "breaking a glass ceiling" in the Gulf region.

The program sparked curiosity and interest throughout the region, and applications poured in from numerous countries across the Middle East. "We got over 440 applications, some from Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, even though the program specified that just Gulf countries were eligible," says Dr. Nabelah Haraty, YWL program coordinator and lecturer of Communication Arts at LAU. This "is a sign that the program was very well received in the Arab world," she adds. Following this inaugural event, the participants will be implementing the projects they developed at the workshops in their home countries, and then will meet again next summer (2010) for another two weeks to discuss the progress and impact of their small projects.

MEPI in the Press

Yemen, DED discuss technical cooperation aspects

Yemen Times - Yemen

August 24, 2009

<http://yementimes.com/article.shtml?i=1288&p=local&a=5>

Hands-on training in filmmaking for Qataris

Peninsula On-line - Qatar

August 22, 2009

http://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/Display_news.asp?section=Local_News&month=August2009&file=Local_News2009082314453.xml

Seminar on "Yemeni Woman, 2011 Elections" held in Sana'a

Saba NET (Yemen News Agency) - Yemen

August 19th, 2009

<http://www.sabanews.net/en/news191873.htm>

Women's rights highlighted

Gulf News - UAE

August 12th, 2009

<http://www.gulfnews.com/nation/Government/10339867.html>

Arab women attend Beirut leadership workshop

Daily Star - Lebanon

August 10th, 2009

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=1&article_id=105099

"Women and Political Participation" project concluded

Saba NET - Yemen

August 12th, 2009

<http://sabanews.net/en/news191198.htm>

US affirms commitment to boost relations with Jordan

Petra NET (Jordan News Agency) - Jordan

August 12th, 2009

<http://www.fananews.com/look/english/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=2&NrArticle=611974&NrIssue=1&NrSection=1>

Youth anti-terrorism symposium launched in Sana'a

Saba NET - Yemen

August 10th, 2009

<http://www.sabanews.net/en/news191085.htm>

Oqsim holds workshop to boost youth talents

Kuwait Times - Kuwait

August 4th, 2009

http://www.kuwaittimes.net/read_news.php?newsid=OTeWODk2MzY0

Santa Fe plays host to Mideast students

Santa Fe New Mexican - US

July 30th, 2009

http://www.santafenewmexican.com/Local_News/Inspiration-Abroad

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